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A Comparative Study on “New” and “Old” Social
Significance of *The Merchant of Venice*

<<威尼斯商人>> “新” “旧” 社会意义的对比研究

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Synopsis

This paper researches the social significance of William Shakespeare's notable play *The Merchant of Venice* from the perspectives of both Shakespeare's times and modern times.

The paper, from two different historical periods, analyzes the “new” and “old” social significance of *The Merchant of Venice*. Through comparing the differences between the two parts, the “new” social significance of *The Merchant of Venice* that the paper believes becomes obvious. The paper considers that the “new” social significance of *The Merchant of Venice* is to unmask unreasoning prejudice against the Jews and to satirize the Christians' hypocrisy.

In Chapter One, the paper states the features of the society in Shakespeare's times. The part emphasizes that the dominant position of the Christians and the marginalized position of the Jews are the social features of Shakespeare's times, and the Christians oppressed the Jews for a long time. The paper also reveals the prevailing anti-semitism of that times.

In Chapter Two, the paper discusses the “old” social significance of this play in Shakespeare's times. First, the paper exposes the insatiable greed and brutality of Shylock. The ugly image of Shylock is clearly reflected in the chapter. For the sake of money and hatred, he can even lose human nature and sense. Second, the paper glorifies the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio. Antonio can sacrifice his own life in order to help his friend Bassanio. Likewise, Bassanio will also give anything for saving Antonio. Finally, the paper sets forth Portia of great beauty, wit and loyalty. Apparently, Portia is the perfect representative of Christian women.

In Chapter Three, the paper is concerned with the social changes in modern times. This section deals with Jewish Emancipation with social changes and Jewish History in Germany. With the development of the society and conceptual change of the people, the Jews gradually gain racial equality.

In Chapter Four, the paper discusses the “new” social significance of this play in modern times. First, the paper dissertates unreasoning prejudice against the Jews. By anatomizing the character of Shylock, the paper believes that Shylock suffers from

unfair treatment owing to his identity and his animosity is the instinctive reaction towards his experience. Second, the paper discourses upon the Christians' hypocrisy. For the treating of the point, the paper expatiates on Christians' false standards of friendship and love, and their so-called mercy. The paper believes that the real evil in this play is the corrupt moral and ethical value system of the Christian.

The paper considers that we may look beyond the past point of view to find the social significance of *The Merchant of Venice* from the 21th century standpoint, to unmask unreasoning prejudice against the Jews and to satirize the Christians' hypocrisy, with the right attitude to analyze the Christian and Jewish characters in this play. After hundreds of years, a new social significance of *The Merchant of Venice* will come into the world. So *The Merchant of Venice* is quite an extraordinary play.

Key Words: Social Significance; Prejudice; Hypocrisy; Times

摘 要

本论文从莎士比亚时代和现代两个视角探究了莎士比亚著名戏剧《威尼斯商人》的社会意义。

通过分析《威尼斯商人》在两个不同历史时期社会意义的差异,戏剧在新时期新视角下的社会意义浮出水面。

这部戏剧在莎士比亚时代的社会意义,本文主要从以下三个方面论述:一、揭露夏洛克贪得无厌的贪婪和凶狠残暴,夏洛克丑恶的形象展现得淋漓尽致,为了追求金钱和复仇,他甚至可以失去人性和理智。二、歌颂安东尼奥和巴萨尼奥之间的伟大友谊,为了友谊,他们可以为对方付出一切甚至牺牲自己的生命。三、对美丽、智慧、忠诚的鲍西娅的赞美,显然,鲍西娅是莎士比亚时代女性基督徒的完美典范。

但是站在新时期的角度,作者认为《威尼斯商人》的社会意义在于对犹太人毫无理性偏见的批判和对基督徒伪善的讽刺。通过剖析夏洛克的性格,文章认为由于犹太人的身份夏洛克忍受了不公平的待遇,因此他对基督徒的仇恨是他遭遇的本能反应。而真正邪恶的是基督徒腐败的伦理道德价值观。

文章为了烘托新旧社会意义对比这一主题,还阐述了两部分的背景资料。首先,莎士比亚时代基督徒占统治地位和犹太人处边缘地位的社会特征,犹太人长期以来受到基督徒的欺压和凌虐。以及揭示了那个时代的反犹太主义浪潮。其次,随着社会的发展和人们思想观念的改变,犹太人逐渐争取民族平等得到解放。

笔者认为我们应该摆脱时代的局限,站在二十一世纪的角度重新审视莎士比亚这部伟大的作品——《威尼斯商人》,赋予这部旧时代的作品新的内涵。

关键字: 社会意义; 偏见; 伪善; 时代

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Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564~1616) is one of the most remarkable playwrights and poets the world has ever known. With 37 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 long poems, he has established his giant position in world literature. He has also been given the highest praises by various scholars and critics all over the world. In the past four hundred years or so, books and essays on Shakespeare and his works have kept coming out in large quantities.

William Shakespeare was born probably on April 23, 1564, into a merchant's family in Stratford-on-Avon. His father, John Shakespeare, who was variously described as a glover, wool-dealer, farmer, and butcher, was a man of some importance in the town, repeatedly serving as a member of the town council. Shakespeare spent his childhood in that beautiful market town and attended the Stratford Grammar School. His real teachers were nature and its people that surrounded him. In 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a woman several years his senior. She gave birth to three children: Susanna and the twins, Judith and Hamnet. It was probably because he had to support his growing family that Shakespeare left Stratford for London in 1586 or 1587.

Shakespeare went to London which afforded a wonderful environment for the development of drama. Shakespeare worked both as actor and playwright. He acted with and wrote for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which was later renamed the King's Men. Shakespeare established himself so well as a playwright that Robert Greene, one of the "University Wits," resentfully declared him to be "an upstart crow."

From about 1591 to about 1611, Shakespeare was in the prime of his dramatic career and his plays came out one after another. In 1593 and 1594, he published two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both of which were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. He also wrote sonnets, which were published in 1609. He wrote sad stories called tragedies, like *Romeo and Juliet*, funny stories or comedies, romantic stories and stories about historical figures such as Julius Caesar. By 1597, Shakespeare was so prosperous that he bought the largest house in Stratford, known as New Place. About 1610 Shakespeare left London and retired to Stratford, though he continued to write for some time. He died on April 23, 1616.

Shakespeare died on his birthday in 1616, almost 400 years ago. But why are his works still popular today? Because his works concern common human themes, such as betrayal, murder, lust, power, ambition and love. These themes are as much a part of human nature today as they were in Shakespeare's age and are the themes we see in modern soap operas and Hollywood films. Even though his theatre, The Globe, was burned down in 1613, it was rebuilt in London in 1997 and you can still see his plays performed there today.

Shakespeare's influence on the English language can still be felt today. We talk about "fair play", meaning honest behaviour, but this phrase was first used by Shakespeare. He coined the phrase "you can have too much of a good thing". And it was Shakespeare who came up with the expression to disappear "into thin air" which we still use today when we lose something. In Shakespeare's plays and poetry, he used a huge vocabulary, introducing words and expressions to a wider audience. So the plays and poetry had a great influence on the development and reputation of the English language.

Shakespeare's works have been translated into every major language in the world. And perhaps we'll still be as fascinated by his works 400 years from now as we've been for the last 400.

"William Shakespeare is really the defining icon for modern literature" (Cao, 2001:334). Because of his plays, prose, and poems, the works of Shakespeare are considered to be some of the finest literature ever written. His stories established a foundation on which thousands of dramas, romances, and histories have been based. During his fifty-two year life, Shakespeare produced plays that have been the models for books and movies for hundreds of years. "One of Shakespeare's outstanding points as a writer was his colorful mastery of the English language, which was nothing short of genius" (Chen, 2001: 128). Shakespeare's keen annotations into the 16th century granted historians a glimpse into traditional 16th century life.

If William Shakespeare traveled the space-time tunnel to come to our times, how would he rewrite *The Merchant of Venice*? This question will have many different answers. To be sure, Shakespeare will show us a new work that is different from the former.

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